Wanted: A Better Reason as Guide

ALLAN BLOOM'S POSITION in *The Closing of the American Mind* is provincial to such a degree that it is dangerous to a sufficient re-opening of that mind. The danger lies in part in the persuasive description of *a* mind unquestionably inhabiting the academy, but presented as if it were indeed *the* mind. A rarefied specimen from the world of intellect is presented as the species. There seems to me also a presence in the argument of an irritated nostalgia, exacerbated by a constricted view of the liberal arts in relation to community. I am tempted to conclude that Bloom is an intellectual antiquarian whose sympathies lie so decidedly with Enlightenment constrictions of reason that his portrait of the American mind can be partial at best. The position he takes is that mind can remove itself from the complexity of existence by an exercise of reason. The suggestion is that, in our current intellectual confusions, the intellectual's best recourse is such a removal. It is a position which (for the sake of concision) Eric Voegelin has explored at length in *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (1968) and in *From Enlightenment to Revolution* (1975). That is, it is the position of the secular gnostic.

After an initial celebration of the book on its publication, including a generous attention to it in op-ed pieces, there seemed to follow a momentary euphoria, typical within the conservative spectrum I fear whenever firm words are spoken and assumed to mean action thereby already accomplished in the social and political arenas. That has been the flaw in current conservative quarters. Disillusion within the conservative spectrum is the current consequence, the lesson not adequately learned that a considerable distance lies between the action in the Word as announced by St. John ("In the beginning was the Word") and the word in the mouth of fallible man.

There was a moment of relief when Bloom's book was published and talked about: The academy must necessarily right itself, having been so roundly exposed as anti-academic. Euphoria threatened to transpose into intellectual ennui, but then dissident voices began to rise against Bloom within the conservative camp; their voices were quite distinct from the inevitable objections from factions of the fanatical Left such as the feminists, the Marxists, or the Darwinian naturalists of the NEA. In response to this dissent on the Right, Russell Hittinger very properly raised a warning to us dissidents, (in the Fall 1987 issue of *The Intercollegiate Review).* His warning is that we must be careful not to throw out reason in our argument because we have reservations about Bloom's version of reason. What I intend to speak for here is a better reason as guide to intellect than the one advanced by Bloom.

In the judicious exploration of his warning to us, Hittinger agrees with Bloom's assertion that America lacks a traditional literary culture and is, therefore, at a considerable disadvantage in the throes of the rampant egalitarianism that threatens democratic institutions. I suggest that, to the contrary, we do have a literary culture championed by the intellectual community but one at such variance from social and political realities as to become antagonistic to the "American mind," whose good instinct in the matter is unsupported by that intellectual community. The traditional literary culture is one spawned by and disseminated from the twenty or thirty academies that are the special concern of Bloom. Just how radically removed from the "American mind" this culture is becomes increasingly a concern, as indicated in Russell Jacoby's recent *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (1987).

Hittinger makes a very telling remark to my point, as an aside, wondering that "the role played by medieval men in constructing universities which are recognizably similar to our own is never mentioned by Bloom." As to why the roots of academe should be so ignored, I suggest that it is because Bloom's position is more indigenously that of an American intellectual than of a European one, in spite of his considerable attention to Rousseau and Plato. His position is compatible with the very intellectual tradition he seems to call in question. Bloom's schematic reading of natural minds, seemingly derived from Plato and especially from the *Republic,* is rather a reading of Plato limited by an Enlightenment reason further restricted and filtered by Transcendental vagaries that have been a longtime infection in the American academic mind.

I find it not only notable that the medieval roots of the Western academy are not a part of Bloom's concern, but also even more surprising that he makes no mention of Ralph Waldo Emerson or of Emerson's own version of his argument, "The American Scholar," a mind and a work underlying Bloom's view of the academy. One needs only to examine Bloom's categories of students to see my point. There are those, he says, who are much concerned with the "relevant," which is to say (as I understand his category) those students concerned with topical events as immediately pressing upon personal circumstances. The anti-war turmoil in the 1960s illustrates the destruction of the academy by the "relevantists," with the academy becoming a staging area for contra-revolution in the social and political countryside surrounding the academy. Then there is a second category: Those who "will have a spirit of enthusiasm that subsides as family and ambition provide them with other objects of interest." One ventures to say, incidentally, that this category actually supports the American academy at its economic level. This category may well prove restive when called upon to maintain the academy for Bloom's third category of student—those for whom the academy finally exists in Bloom's schemata. This is "a small number" who "will spend their lives in an effort to be autonomous. It is for these last, especially, that liberal education exists."

There is, by the assertion of these categories, the seeming assumption of separate species of mankind determined by an inherited mind-set; thus one's inclination to be concerned with the "relevant" or with "family" is prohibitive of the mind's flourishing through the virtues of liberal arts. The coloring given is that of abstractionism exercised through naturalistic presumptions about existence, a more recent intellectual grounding than Plato's *Republic.* Thus Bloom's elevation of the "small number" of elect minds would not likely find a point of analogy in the medieval scholastic. But these objections are not my immediate concern. Rather, we should note the signal word describing the end to which these elect are to devote themselves: They are to become *autonomous.* The description makes quite clear the presence of reason truncated from the larger understandings of reason in the history of philosophy. Now if Enlightenment thought in its liberal manifestations has largely collapsed into our current intellectual chaos, as I contend, Bloom nevertheless maintains its validity as a means of restoring the academy. In my view such a restoration would make the academy a reservation for the isolated mind, rather than an institution vital to a community of souls. What is to be rescued through Bloom's argument are conditions suited to an autonomy of mind maintained by its own reason. It is mind sufficient unto itself, as argued by Emerson.

One can sympathize with this longing, given the intellectual chaos that erodes mind. But that sympathy is more out of an instinct for mind's survival than a thoroughly reasoned understanding of mind's role in the community of mankind. We must recognize in Bloom's position a species of the deconstructions of reason that have brought on the chaos of mind in the first place. The problem is not with reason itself but rather with the presump-

tion that the proper end of reason is the elevation of mind to an autonomous survival in the jungle of lesser minds contending over the personally relevant activisms or the comfortable estate of family or profession. What is advocated is the self-sufficiency of Emersonian thought. Alas, on the principle that autonomy is the desired end, one can establish any number of temporal justifications of any number of categories of self-sufficiency. Our second category of minds must, in the light of such a principle, be excused a reluctance to support the academy, having other and more pressing "objects of interest." The nineteenth-century German philosophy underlying Romanticism, which Bloom examines severely, rises against this same Enlightenment version of reason, but it does so on the grounds of autonomy of the self as well. When autonomy as the principal end of mind is pursued through a faith in the self-sufficiency of mind, the extensions of this principle allow no grounds to distinguish between the mind in its "solitary quest" for autonomy through reason and the mind on that same quest through "feeling."

In the name of the autonomy of the "self," then, all manner of actions by mind against the complex reality of the self and of the world emerge, including those very minds against which Bloom directs some of his most effective criticism. I am suggesting that the root source of the perversions of the self he laments is the very position he would recover. Feminist, Marxist, Deconstructionist, Libertarian, Neo-Conservative—the list might be easily extended. Any and each is justified by Enlightenment reason on this principle of self-autonomy, whether the position is advanced in the name of reason or of feeling. Hence the spirited attack against relativism mounted by Bloom does not in the end have any sufficient ground to distinguish it from the species of more spectacular relativism bringing chaos to the American academy.

One need only cite the eloquent introduction to *The Closing of the American Mind* supplied by Saul Bellow. Bellow recalls having been drawn when young to "the world of the streets" rather than to "a life of pious observances," a calling considered legitimate on the ground that he had the "tastes and habits of a writer." Those tastes and habits, as explored in the introduction, led him to eschew intellectual and spiritual disciplines in the interest of the randomness of enthusiasm. There is much truth in Bellow's assertion that "the book of the world . . . is being closed by the 'learned' who are raising walls of opinions to shut the world out." But the difficulty is that Bellow's "learned" are not truly learned. Nor is there any sure safety in the assumption that the isolated mind called to "the world of the streets" will itself be sufficiently open to the complexity of those streets. The literary movement associated with Bellow's Chicago, Naturalism, is ample warning against abandoning "pious observance." To abandon piety toward existence may lead to a "relevancy" that quickly distorts the rich complexity of the world of the streets.

To reject reason because of Enlightenment reductions of it to autonomous ends in the name of unreasoned autonomous ends—the "romantic" reaction to "rationalism"—is but to pose one partial dimension of mind against another in a struggle for power over the world of the streets. What needs saying is that reason as Bloom seems to understand it is not the final issue. What is needed is a recovery of a pursuit through reason of wisdom, a pursuit requiring the collective faculties of mind, of which reason is certainly the principal one. But reason is a gift of means in the created nature of man. Its full operation is not man's end, however much man prides himself on being distinguished within the orders of being by his gift of reason. Means reduced to an ideal end no doubt explains the strange conjunction of heroes for Bloom, as for instance of Rousseau and Plato, whose minds are not so easily made compatible as his joining of them urges. One is well advised to explore as a corrective to such yoking Voegelin's analysis of both Rousseau and Plato; Voegelin's counter-argument is most

revealing of the inadequacies of Bloom's Platonism and Romanticism.

Plato's *Republic,* Bloom says, is "for me *the* book on education, because it really explains to me what I experience as a man and a teacher." If I can depend on some of my own teachers, including Voegelin among the moderns and St. Thomas among the ancients, and also on my own reflections, I believe the *Republic* to be a portrait of the philosopher as a young mind and therefore to be taken with caution. Where Bloom finds in it "a teaching of moderation and resignation," I myself find in it a reduction of the quest for order and for the structure of the *polis* to an abstract definition of a saviour: the philosopher-king whose ragged manifestations in the political affairs of this century of all centuries ought to require our looking more skeptically at the dialogue. One might better recommend Plato's *Seventh Letter,* at the end of his growing life, as far more resonant of moderation and resignation, especially after his many experiences with would-be philosopher-kings in Athens and Syracuse. Plato, in the wisdom of age and experience, advises that it is the second category of Bloom's mind that provides health and order through a wisdom gradually acquired by those men who are "in the first place advanced in years, who possess wives and children at home and can reckon the most and best and the most famous ancestors, and who own all of them sufficient property."

The root sense of order through which Bloom would have us restore and justify the academy is insufficient except for the preservation of the isolated, autonomous mind. That such a mind is capable of distorting idea and history in its quest for autonomy is witnessed in the book itself. One must feel a considerable sympathy for the assertion that "The most successful tyranny is not the one that uses force to assure uniformity but the one that removes the awareness of other possibilities, that makes it seem inconceivable that other ways are viable. . . . [T]here is what might be called an official interpretation of the past that makes it appear defective or just a step on the way to the present regime." This statement is pertinent to the arguments Voegelin makes in his analysis of tripartite reductions of history from Joachim of Flora through Hegel and Marx into our own day. It also fits the tyranny of Darwinian evolution in the face of cogent arguments from Gilson, Barfield, Jaki.

One is surprised, then, by Bloom's own illustration of his generalization: "An example of this [tyranny] is the interpretation of Rome and the Roman empire in Augustine's *City of God.* Rome is not forgotten, but it is remembered only through the lens of a victorious Christianity and therefore poses no challenge to it." This statement contains the only mention of St. Augustine, whose influence on liberal arts in the Western academy is very considerable. Nor was Christianity triumphant when Augustine was writing his great book, for both Rome's civilization and Christianity itself were being threatened with extinction by barbarians whose analogues one finds in our own institutions ever since the end of World War II. Neither can it be said, in the light of Enlightenment rationality followed by the rise of nineteenth-century mechanistic science, that Christianity has been a triumphant tyranny of mind during these past two or three centuries—and most certainly not in the Western academy. There was perhaps a brief moment in the history of Western mind when it was dominant, in the thirteenth century. But one notes that the great academic mind of that moment, St. Thomas Aquinas, is remembered by Bloom only once, and only for having read and taken Aristotle seriously.

There have been minds hardly respectful of viable ways separate from their own, but minds Bloom understands as greater than Thomas's or Augustine's: "[I]t seems absurd to me to say that Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz, Montesquieu and even Voltaire . . . were less deep than Jacques Maritain or T. S. Eliot—to mention two famous contemporaries from whose mouths I learned as a young man that the Enlightenment was shallow." We are to

conclude from this remark, presumably, that Maritain and Eliot advanced themselves as deeper thinkers than these Renaissance to Enlightenment thinkers. But once more the history of intellectual argument in this century hardly supports such a suggestion. When Bloom was a young man learning from these "mouths," both Maritain and Eliot were struggling to recover other viable ways from the tyranny of two opponents: modernist rationalism and romanticism, divisions of mind directly out of Bloom's heroes.

The proper parallel here is, first of all, Maritain's and Eliot's minds to Bloom's. Surely neither of these teachers was so superficial as to have charged Bloom's figures with being simply shallow; the destructions of intellect everywhere about them were too conspicuously evident of their continuing influence. On the other hand, and rather certainly, Maritain and Eliot would have pointed out how partial and narrow a vision of reality those minds advance. But Maritain and Eliot would very likely detect some shallowness in Bloom's caricature of their position. Maritain especially might wonder at Bloom's conception of the discrete individual, as when Bloom says that "there are various kinds of soul" with "various capacities for truth and error." One might expect a student of Maritain to be more cautious with such a complex term as *soul.* One suspects here a residual and vague Platonism, arising more nearly out of Emersonian imprecisions about the soul than out of Plato.

The concept of the *polis,* to which one must at some point relate the academy as institution, is equally vague and residual of the precise thought of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas. Consider this passage:

> Country, religion, family, ideas of civilization, all the sentimental and historical forces that stood between cosmic infinity and the individual, providing some notion of a place within the whole, have been rationalized and have lost their compelling force. America is experienced not as a common project but as a framework within which people are only individuals, where they are left alone. . . . The advanced Left talks about self-fulfillment; the Right, in its most popular form, is Libertarian, i.e., the right-wing form of the Left, in favor of everybody's living as he pleases.

Such a description, seen in its narrowness, is accurate enough, though the antagonistic tone (given the ideal of autonomy) is surprising. But the description of Left and the Right is most inadequate in light of the realities of those factions within the American *polis* at this juncture of history. Indeed, the Right is perhaps more peripherally "Libertarian" than allowed. Is it accurate, proportionately, when one considers the Fundamentalists, the Traditionalists, and even a considerable portion of the Neo-Conservatives on the Right? Here again is a tunnel vision, which is not necessarily conclusive of shallowness, though Bloom's rhetorical stance is at times decidedly inclined to a shallowness. Consider the blanket dismissal of anything "Southern," the "Southern" mind as seen by Bloom set more in the mode of a nineteenth-century abolitionist reading of it than by an advocate of reason.

What begins to appear is that Bloom's vision of the academy is from a limited personal experience. He has lived in a rarefied intellectual environment, that of his elect academies. He finds a betrayal of mind in those institutions, a true finding to which I would add the extension of that betrayal to the American academy generally through the mechanisms of intellectual imitation. But my reading of the betrayal finds it beginning much earlier than the current collapse and closing of mind. I hold the betrayal to be that of the Western intelligentsia since the Renaissance, insofar as that diverse community of mind has turned more and more to autonomy of the individual as the principal end. So I am less than impressed by Bloom's limited critique of the American mind; the instrumental mind at work here seems to me flawed by its narrow reading of mind's betrayal. Bloom can see "coun-

try, religion, family, ideas of civilization" as merely "sentimental and historical forces" protecting an ambiguous individual from the threat of "cosmic infinity." To see in this manner must qualify at once what that mind can make of such institutions as country and family and religion, let alone what is to be made of the relation of the academy to them—that is, the relation of intellect to community.

Here is final, but crucial, instance to the point from the concluding pages of *The Closing of the American Mind:* "The real community of man, in the midst of all the self-contradictory simulacra of community, is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers, that is, in principle, of all men to the extent they desire to know. But in fact this includes only a few, the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were disagreeing about the nature of the good." Bloom's conception of the Platonic *spoudaioi* would surely prove unacceptable either to Plato or Aristotle, because finally it is content with the autonomy of the individual, an autonomy self-generated by reason and refined to elevated friendships that are at a considerable remove from the ragged concerns of community. Self-satisfaction can be the only end.

Little wonder that Bloom as teacher is interested in "the kind of young persons who populate the twenty or thirty best universities." They constitute the "greatest talents," in evidence of which they have somehow chosen to pursue liberal arts, though not liberal arts as conceived by the medieval institution. Here the conception of liberal arts education is much closer to the version established in America by Harvard out of Emersonian thought and programmed by Charles W. Eliot—a deconstruction of liberal arts resisted by Irving Babbitt, George Santayana, and T. S. Eliot. For Bloom other students (and faculty?) "have their own needs and may very well have very different characters from those I describe," *i.e.,* from those "greatest talents" bent on establishing and living the autonomous mind. Once more the use of *character* here reduces the high questions of mind *in* community toward the level of spectacle, as does speaking of *soul* as various in kind with "various capacities for truth and error."

Little wonder, too, if in consequence of such abstract conceptions of person to be imposed upon community in the name of the highest thought, we find E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987) so often coupled with Bloom's book. A "Great Books" attempt at community was spawned in Bloom's twenty or thirty institutions in an attempt to conciliate Babbitt's Humanism and Charles W. Eliot's pragmatic Emersonianism. Now through Hirsch the tendency in the continuing crisis of intellect in community is to reduce "The Great Books" program to a "Catechism of Cultural Phrases," aimed primarily at the provinces in which "the American mind" feels itself isolated as if on outpost duty.

Conservatives are well advised to observe that Bloom's view of the academy is a very narrow one, a very partial view of the complexity of community. A considerable sorting out of argument is in order, requiring precisions of reason in pursuit of a larger wisdom about the nature of man in community and nature than Bloom perceives. Otherwise the argument must degenerate into the shallow surface conflict between a gnostic elitism and a gnostic egalitarianism, both of which operate from the principle that mind is of value because it defines, establishes, maintains, and defends the autonomous self. That is the problem we begin with at the first alarm over the failure of the American academy. But as of this moment we are not much advanced beyond that beginning recognition.

—Marion Montgomery